

Report

Timpanogos Cave National Monument

■ 1.0 Site Description

President Warren G. Harding designated the Timpanogos Cave National Monument as a protected site on October 14, 1922. The president's proclamation officially recognized the three caves on the site as natural features of national significance and extraordinary scenic and scientific value. Hansen Cave was first discovered in 1887 by Martin Hansen, a Mormon settler. Middle and Timpanogos Caves were discovered and explored by various local groups. One of these groups eventually worked to have the site protected for future generations. Originally under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service, the site was transferred to the NPS system on August 10, 1933.

Timpanogos NM is located in the American Fork Canyon, six miles from the town of American Fork, Utah, and approximately 45 minutes from Salt Lake City, Utah. Other neighboring communities include the hamlets of Highland and Alpine, three to four miles from the monument.

Figure 1. Regional Map



The site encompasses 250 acres, all under federal jurisdiction, situated in a highly constrained, steep sided canyon, with a valley floor averaging 75 yards in width.

Access to the caves begins at the Visitor Center located on Utah State Highway 92, where tickets for tours are sold. There are two parking lots on either side of the highway, adjacent to the Visitor Center, and an overflow parking area 50 yards down the road. To reach the cave entrance, a 1.5-hour, 1.5-mile ascent covering 1,065 feet must be traversed. Because of the restricted size of the waiting area at the cave entrance and inside the cave itself, groups are limited to 20, and hikes to the cave entrance are staggered accordingly. The guided tour through the cave covers a distance of one-half mile, and lasts approximately one hour. Cave features include stalactites, stalagmites, helictites, flowstone, and draperies created from the mineral deposits left by water. Other visitor facilities include two handicapped accessible picnic areas, and a quarter-mile interpretive nature trail.

The cave and trail are open from early May to November, weather permitting. The Visitor Center is open daily from 7:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and operates until January. Annual visitation reaches over 125,000 persons. The peak visitation months are July and August. Weekends and holidays are the busiest times, with over 1,100 persons making the hike to see the caves on 58 tours, and an overall total of 1,600+ using the monument facilities on the 4th of July, and July 24th, Utah's Pioneer Day. Visitors typically spend four to six hours at the site.

A General Management Plan for Timpanogos NM was developed in 1993. The plan emphasized the need for a new, larger Visitor Center to replace the current double-wide, modular facility. The plan calls for the new center to be located three miles away from the current site, just outside the mouth of the canyon, which would provide more space for buildings and parking.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

No Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) services, other than school bus field trips for children, currently exist in terms of access to the monument location. The pedestrian hiking trail beginning at the Visitor Center is the only means of access to the caves.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

ATS needs identified for the monument include:

- The possibility of using a shuttle route to transport 20 persons at a time and running between the new Visitor Center site and the cave trailhead, to alleviate parking, traffic, and safety problems.

- Providing assistance to the handicapped in negotiating the hiking trail to the cave entrance. This could be accomplished by providing staff escorts and building safety features such as guard rails to prevent fatal falls off the cliff. However, the cave itself cannot be modified to provide handicapped access.
- Making the quarter-mile nature trail along the American Fork River handicapped accessible.
- Building a new hiking trail from the communities of Highland and Alpine to the monument.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

Building a new Visitor Center on a less constrained site would provide safer and more convenient parking facilities for visitors. Currently, on peak visiting days, both paved parking lots and the graveled overflow lot quickly fill to capacity, and late arriving visitors park on property belonging to the U.S. Forest Service, and along the shoulder of SH 92. Locating parking all on one site next to the Visitor Center and using shuttles to transport visitors to the trailhead would eliminate automobile/pedestrian conflicts, as well as conflicts between through traffic and traffic visiting the site. Recently, over 5,700 vehicles were counted on the 4th of July on the twisting highway, causing traffic congestion, and requiring traffic direction by monument staff.

Making the cave entrance-hiking trail and the interpretive nature trail handicapped accessible would allow people with disabilities the opportunity to experience these natural environments, which they are not able to enjoy at this time.

Building a hiking trail from the communities of Highland and Alpine would slightly reduce traffic on Utah State Highway 92, and provide additional area recreational facilities.

■ 5.0 Bibliography

Timpanogos Cave NM. "Timpanogos Cave Official Map and Guide." GPO: 1997-417-648/60146 Reprint 1996.

Timpanogos Cave National Monument. Internet site: <http://www.nps.gov/tica>. Information printed November 22, 1999.

■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Kit Mullen, Superintendent. Telephone interview. November 23, 1999